

Project on the Future of Higher Education
Creating a Vital Campus in a Climate of Restricted Resources:
Role of Student Self-Reflection and Self-Assessment

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As campuses face an era of declining resources, yet seek to maintain quality student learning and a vital faculty life, assessment of student learning is essential to document and promote effective and efficient methods of learning and teaching. As Guskin and Marcy (2003, pg 15) said, "Focusing on the assessment of institution-wide common undergraduate student learning outcomes as the basis for an undergraduate degree changes how we approach student learning." These changes are fundamental, and shape the ways we design learning environments and collect data from and about students.

In learning environments where courses and educational experiences are organized around learning outcomes and ways students learn, rather than solely by the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge (e.g. biology, English literature) and the ways these disciplines are organized, students will not only experience learning differently, but the ways learning is documented must also change to help the learner see his or her progress toward expected outcomes. Engaging learners in activities that encourage them to document and assess their own learning is essential since it gives both the learner and the educator insights into how well the learner is learning and how well the learning experiences are contributing to the student's process and progress toward the learning goals.

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In this paper, the roles for both self-reflection and self-assessment in these new learning environments are discussed. For the purposes of this paper, we make the following distinctions between these activities. Although all self-assessment processes include reflection, not all reflection activities meet the criteria for formal self-assessment. Activities that prompt self-reflection may occur informally in classrooms, in student discussions, as elements of assignments, and like other forms of formative assessment, they provide information to both the learner and the instructor about the learning processes, and the intended and unintended consequences of the learning experience. However, these activities may not be tied to specific learning outcomes or criteria. These activities often have the flavor of formative assessment.

Self-assessment involves seeking the learner's judgment about how well their work documents learning outcomes, often including clear expectations or criterion frameworks as the guides for making these judgments. These assessment criteria help students learn how to direct some of their reflections and provide a common language between student and faculty on progress toward learning outcomes. These activities often have the flavor of summative assessment

At both author's institutions, Fairhaven College and Alverno College, narrative student self-assessment is a primary mode of evaluation and students develop a reflective voice throughout their undergraduate program through planned and integrated experiences.

To receive credit for any Fairhaven class, students must write narrative self-assessments of their progress and accomplishments in the class. The faculty member responsible for the class responds to these evaluations in writing. Shorter in-class reflective writing exercises help students develop their abilities to reflect on their experiences in class and in the field and to write these final narrative self-assessment documents. As part of their senior capstone course, students write a final summary essay reflecting on their learning across their college program.

Reflective work is a part of every course at Alverno. All students are required to self assess their work, whether assignments or faculty designed assessments.

At Alverno, the faculty make a distinction between self-assessment and reflection. They see self-assessment as a complex, reflective ability focused on developing judgment whereas reflection tends to be more exploratory. All self-assessment requires reflection but not all reflection leads to self-assessment.

Self-reflection

Reflection, done well, is more than telling a personal story and is distinctly different from displaying the acquisition of the objective, factual content of a course that might be assessed through tests or observations made in community based settings and reported in a field journal. Good reflective work prompts students to document not only what they have learned, but to also think about how they have learned it.

Reflective activities provide the student, the faculty and potentially the institution with

rich data about how and why particular instructional strategies succeed or fail, leading to more effective teaching and learning. Student reflective writing can be an important diagnostic tool for the faculty member. Students may miss the intended outcomes of a course, a project or field experience, or other kinds of unintended learning may happen that are not immediately apparent. Both these perspectives may surface in a reflective exercise. As one faculty member remarked:

*Reflective writing is also a place where I can identify gaps in their learning. Without that kind of reflection, I can only assume where the gaps are. Without it, it's hard to meet their needs beyond what the syllabus requires. Reflection allows me to tailor the teaching to meet their real needs.*²

As students explore the tensions between intellectual ideas from varied sources, competing theories, their own experiences and possible applications in field experiences, they are prompted to examine how they have come to different ideas or different practices. Reflective work becomes an avenue to develop fresh appreciation for tensions between ideas and theories and a tool to help rethink the assumptions on which initial understandings of a problem are based. Reflective practice leads toward this complexity of understanding, and is essential for synthesis and integration. Through reflection faculty help students build bridges between personal experience and theory, approaching knowledge as emergent and transactional, with the learner engaged in a continual reframing, recasting, and reconstruction of past understanding.

Educational theorists have been writing about the importance of reflection as part of the learning process for decades. David Kolb's learning cycle (Kolb 1981) included "reflective observation" as an essential part of a four-stage process. John Dewey reminded us that "Reflective thinking . . . involves a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty . . . [Reflective] persons . . . weigh, ponder [and] deliberate . . . a process of evaluating what occurs to them in order to decide upon its force and weight for their problem." (Dewey 1933, 120)

Jack Mezirow (Mezirow and Associates 2000) reminds us that reflective discourse involves both critical assessment of our assumptions and an examination of collective or common experiences to either affirm or shift and transform our previously held judgments. And as we move into the world of work, Chris Argyris (1991) speculates that effective employees and managers must move beyond problem solving to reflection about how they go about defining and solving problems. With this kind of reflection comes the possibility of paradigmatic shifts to new ways of solving problems that might not be attained by simply moving through the problem solving stages.

The window that reflective student writing provides into the students' learning processes and into unintended learning that may occur becomes increasingly important as we provide students with venues to document their learning outside of the traditional classroom setting. As more learning takes place in community or on-line venues, helping students become more skilled at self-assessment and reflection will be an increasingly important part of a faculty member's responsibilities as students seek to document effectively their work outside of classrooms. Reflection becomes essential to transform

field experiences from simple volunteer activities into deeper learning. Without a significant reflective component, the links between the intellectual work done in class and community-based or service-learning may not be made. If students' experiences and perspectives remained unexamined, they may simply reinforce and reify all their stereotypes or misconceptions and fail to meet the learning goals of the experience. When students come upon a new experience or idea that conflicts with their own ideas or ways of doing things, they often do not examine these tensions. Instead, they just assume, "I'm right and they're wrong," or "I must have been wrong." Reflection may help students explore the tensions between their own experiences and the field experience, to examine how they might have come to different ideas or different practices, and to slow them down enough to think about how theory relates to their actions.

Providing opportunities for self-reflection seems to enhance students' sense of responsibility and motivation for their own learning as the reflection and assessment processes connect directly with the students' own work. Reflection asks them to think about how theory relates to application in the 'real world,' and also helps students view their own experiences as important enough not to be taken for granted. Through reflection, students (and faculty) recognize that learning from examined experience is as important an instance of learning as from a text or lecture, and that not all learning happens in an abstract environment distant from their lives in the world. Connecting students' lives with their academic and intellectual work may not only improve attainment of learning goals, but may also contribute to enhanced student engagement with the university program, potentially leading to improved retention, academic performance and/or time to degree – all important factors in building a vital and effective campus.

Self-assessment

Many of the reflective activities we use at our institutions provide the groundwork for more formal self-assessment activities. As institutions move toward documented attainment of learning objectives, tracking credits earned, seat time or course grades becomes less important. Instead, assessment of learning focuses on students' ability to demonstrate their learning through multiple modes, which may include tests or other more traditional modes of charting progress, but also opens opportunities for other avenues of documentation, including student self-assessment.

Since students will be assessed on their demonstration of what they have learned, the classroom need not be the only, or even primary venue, in which learning takes place; nor will direct contact with a faculty member always be necessary for all legitimate student learning to occur. There is also the possibility of more directly involving skilled community and employer supervisors of experiential learning experiences as educators who are not only involved in guiding students in their work, but also fostering meaningful student reflection on these experiences.

As Guskin and Marcy imply, student reflection and self-assessment are important strategies that can provide both documentation of the outcomes of learning and some important insights into the process of learning that benefit both student and faculty. In

traditional classroom settings, student self-assessment can enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the teaching/learning dynamic. Letter grades alone fall short of providing the kind of information necessary to document successful attainment of learning objectives. On the other hand, student self-assessment as a component of a dialogue between faculty and student about important learning goals may enhance both the efficiency and the effectiveness of learning by documenting both learning outcomes and the process of learning in traditional classroom settings. As faculty and students engage in this dialogue, they develop a common language about learning and learning goals, which can also lead to more effective learning.

Self-assessment is also often an important element in final portfolios that document the attainment of learning goals set by their programs or institutions. As students select work to illustrate their learning, they interpret each goal, connect it to their work, and write a reflective piece describing how each element provides evidence of the goals attained. Portfolios may provide the opportunity for serious reflection as students re-examine their work and ask how their actions and perceptions have changed and how they have engaged in learning as both actor and agent. When these portfolios are shared, patterns and common experiences surface from these reflections that enhance and deepen individual learning and group understanding.

New Student Roles and Responsibilities

Most students find reflective activities daunting and unfamiliar. They often resist engaging in self-assessment, referring that responsibility back to faculty. Initially, learners expect teachers to tell them how they are doing, as articulated below by several students:

When I started out, I felt like self-assessment was a method that teachers were using so that I could do their jobs for them. And so basically I just kind of left it open-ended. You know, it's like "I know I did OK, you know I did OK, but how did I really do?"

When I first started (college), I didn't see the point of self-assessment. To me it was a waste of time because all that mattered was what the teacher thought of what I did. (Loacker, 2000)

As students and faculty learn a common language through discussion of assessment criteria, both the dialog and student learning are enhanced for these students who often do not know how or on what to reflect (Alverno Faculty, 1994). As students become more able to "reflect in action" they also develop as their own best teacher. As one senior student notes:

By the time you're in your last year, or last two years even, in your advanced level studies, the list of criteria gets smaller and smaller because the instructor really expects you to be able to do that for yourself. I've had self-assessment where it says "assess yourself on this", and where there were no set criteria -- you know, those specific ones we would get as a first-semester students. So, you really do internalize what you're doing. (Loacker, 2000)

We have learned that reflection rarely happens without some kind of structure to support it; the “reflective stance” must be learned and planned for in our programs. Students need to learn new skills and roles and faculty need to design learning experiences that teach for reflection and self-assessment. Loacker and colleagues have researched typical paths students take in developing their reflective and self assessment abilities in order to develop teaching and learning strategies to assist students in becoming their own best teachers. They have noted that learners, in developing the habits of mind to observe, interpret and analyze, judge, and seek ways to improve their own learning, move from novice to more expert self assessors, IF faculty actually teach for this process. There seem to some common elements in most successful reflective activities.

Using student work as the ‘text’: Most successful reflective tasks ask students to view their own work or experience as text and use the same critical analysis skills that they have developed to understand other people’s work to analyze their own work. Students rarely are invited to use their own work as text, or lay their own work against some other template or theory or mode of practice and ask these questions. When they go back to their observational logs, to response papers, to research papers, to annotated bibliographies, to notes on community-experience, and revisit these writings and experiences using their textual analysis skills on their own work, they begin to recognize the ways their ideas have developed. They begin to understand that knowledge is not just something they know or do not know, but is transactional, changed and formed by each new perspective or experience.

Building from personal experiences: Deeper reflection challenges students to explore their own preconceived ideas, assumptions, and experiences and the relation of these to the theory or context of the course or field experience. Reflection helps students develop context for their learning as they move through inquiry, practice, reflection, and back around through the circle again. These exercises can be both powerful and empowering as students begin to understand that their thoughts and experiences have meaning and worth alongside all the experts they study.

Focused strategic questioning: When faculty use journals or other summative writing as part of their reflective pedagogy, critical feedback is essential to help students use these exercises to deepen reflection. Focused questions can help build reflective thinking, helping students foster deeper connections between the text, the experiences, and their lives. Observational logs or journals are often used as a mode of documentation about the development of field based learning objectives. Providing a set of prompting questions help students use the journal or log more effectively to reflect on their learning. Questions such as, “How do the readings connect to one another and to your field experience? Where do your experiences parallel or differ from the perspectives we’ve read this week? What other perspectives are not present? What new ideas or perspectives are developing from this experience? How did you come to think that way? What readings or experiences led you to this idea? How do you think someone else might have come to another idea from his or her background or experience?”

Using technology to build coherence across reflections: One of the challenges students

face in reflecting on their work is how to connect their reflections across learning experiences and disciplinary contexts. When a student solves a problem in chemistry and reflects on his or her process and solution, does the student transfer the new learning garnered from this reflection to other problem contexts? This teaching/learning challenge has been approached in various ways. With the advent of the personal computer, however, a new, and potentially powerful means of assisting students to look across disciplinary and problem contexts has emerged. Electronic portfolios of student work and student reflections can provide the student with an accessible and, if structured carefully, meaningful way to review their development over time and across various disciplinary boundaries. E-portfolios may also provide a centralized, virtual learning space in which the student, instructor(s), and community partners may meet and reflect together on the student's development, thus increasing the efficacy of learning as well as its efficiency.

New Faculty Roles and Responsibilities

Although face-to-face teaching in classrooms will continue to be part of faculty work, in this new learning environment it is likely to be a much smaller aspect of their instructional responsibilities. In this changing environment, helping students build the skills of self-reflection and self-assessment is critical.

Increasingly, faculty will be expected to plan a wide array of opportunities for students to learn through mentoring individualized learning plans, modeling effective learning strategies, helping students design independent inquiry, cultivating community partners, creating collaborative learning opportunities, and sorting and evaluating the multitudinous resources available through technology (Eaton, 2002). Faculty members will no longer be the content 'experts' with a discrete body of knowledge to impart to students through lectures and strategically chosen readings. In the changing university, faculty will spend more time helping students discover how to frame meaningful questions and model the thought processes needed to identify problems, to discriminate and analyze important variables, and to create rather than simply accumulate information. Faculty will also play a key role in certifying learning accomplished in all these other contexts: independent study, field placements, internships, and other community-based learning opportunities.

Providing frameworks that derive from the disciplines to guide student reflection will be one critical need in this transition to a less classroom centered teaching-learning environment and will be a primary role of the faculty. As experts in their disciplinary specialties, they can provide a picture of what "doing the discipline" might look like. Using criteria that they make explicit to their students, they set the bar for students, challenging them to extend themselves and asking them to reflect on how well they have met criteria as they do their academic work. As one student from Hampshire College, which also uses narrative self-assessment processes said:

The reflection activities helped me find a way to see how my work fits into the larger picture of my discipline.

As faculty work with students to develop and realize individual learning plans, a primary responsibility will be to assist students in locating resources and learning opportunities outside the classroom to help them attain their learning objectives and develop appropriate assessment strategies. As students use multiple sources, including lectures, Internet, field experience, print and electronic databases, to gather knowledge, faculty help provide the appropriate criteria to evaluate the evidence necessary to document their learning.

According to Ewell (2002), this role includes three assessment functions: a) ascertaining learner needs and gaps in current knowledge, b) identifying learning opportunities appropriate to remedy these gaps and, c) re-assessing student abilities to see what has been attained and to determine what the next step will be, including the creation of venues for students to apply, integrate and reflect on learning from these other sources.. These changes in delivery of learning also shift our perceptions of who should provide the data about student learning and how it is gathered from these varied sources.

Guskin and Marcy (2003) remind us that faculty also need support to develop skills and practices to foster reflection. Acquiring those skills will require considerable faculty development. When faculty roles are restructured around learning outcomes and new non-classroom relationships with students—e.g., mentoring, leading intensive small group discussions, facilitating student reflection on work experiences, and working as partners with others in the learning process—there will be a need for creative professionals in faculty development centers to support these changes in faculty work.

Campuses will be faced with difficult decisions during this period of declining resources. If the faculty and administrative leadership rise to the challenge of enhancing efficiency and effectiveness while enhancing student learning and a vital faculty, different ways of delivering instruction and documenting student learning will be core elements. Student self-reflection and self-assessment are important parts of this transition. As campuses provide a wider array of avenues for students to develop learning, they also must provide a wider array of avenues for students to document their learning and engage a wider array of professionals in the review of this documentation. As Guskin and Marcy (2003) said,

The key to distinguishing these learning experiences as valid educational ventures will be the degree to which students reflect upon these experiences—with the aid of peers, community members, faculty members and/or other professionals—and demonstrate how their learning meets faculty generated, institutionally approved educational outcomes measured by assessment tools. In following this pattern, a campus can reduce its expenses but offer a richer education. (pg 26)

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